**World Religion Unit:** Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Hinduism** (Ancient World Book Page 116-120)

**Vocabulary:**

*Brahman* A single spiritual power that Hindus believe lives in everything.

*Avatar* A representation of a Hindu god or goddess in human or animal form.

*Reincarnation* The rebirth of the soul in the body of another living being.

*Dharma* The religious and moral duties of Hindus

*Ahimsa* The Hindu idea of nonviolence.

**The Beginnings of Hinduism:**

Aryan prayers were passed on through generations. As Aryan culture mixed with India’s existing cultures, new ideas and beliefs became part of the Vedas. From this blending of ideas and beliefs came one of the world’s oldest living religions, Hinduism.

**A Blend of Religions**: As Hinduism developed over 3,500 years, it absorbed many beliefs from other religions. Hinduism became very complex over time, with many different practices existing side by side. Hindus believe that since people are different, they need many different ways of approaching god.

Hinduism is one of the world’s major religions, and a way of life for more than 850 million people in India today. Its beliefs have influenced people of many other religions. Yet Hinduism is unlike other major world religions.

Hinduism has no one single founder, but Hindus have many great religious thinkers. Hindus worship many gods and goddesses. However, *they believe in one single spiritual power called brahman, which lives in everything*. Hindus believe that there is more than one path to the truth.

**Hindu Gods and Goddesses:** The gods and goddesses of Hinduism stand for different parts of brahman. An ancient Hindu saying expressed the idea: “God is one, but wise people know it by many names.” The most important Hindu gods are *Brahma*, the Creator; *Vishnu*, the Preserver; and *Shiva*, the Destroyer.

Hindu gods take many different forms, called **avatars**. An avatar is the representation of a Hindu god or goddess in human or animal form.

Hindu teachings say that the god *Brahma* was born from a golden egg. He created Earth and everything on it. However, he is not as widely worshiped as Vishnu and Shiva.

Hindus believe that *Vishnu* is a kindly god who is concerned with the welfare of human beings. Vishnu visits Earth from time to time in different forms. He does this to guide humans or to protect them from disaster.

Unlike Vishnu, *Shiva* is not concerned with human matters. He is very powerful. Shiva is responsible for both the creative and the destructive forces of the universe. Shiva developed from the god Rudra, the “wielder of the thunderbolt” in the prayer at the beginning of this section.

Hindu gods have their own families. Many Hindus, for example, worship Shiva’s wife, the goddess Shakti. Hindus believe Shakti plays a role in human life. Like her husband, she is both a destroyer and a creator. She is both kind and cruel.

**The Teachings of Hinduism:**

All Hindus share certain central beliefs that are contained in religious writings or sacred texts.

**The Upanishads:** One of the *Hindu religious texts is the Upanishads*. Upanishad means “sitting near a teacher.” Much of the Upanishads is in the form of questions by pupils and responses by teachers. For example, a pupil asks, “Who created the world?” The teacher replies, “Brahman is the creator, the universal soul.” When asked to describe brahman, the teacher explains that it is too complicated for humans to understand. Brahman has no physical form.

**Reincarnation:** One important idea in the Upanishads is *reincarnation*, or rebirth of the soul. Hindus believe that when a person dies, the soul is reborn in the body of another living thing. Hindus believe that every living thing has a soul. This idea is an important part of other Asian beliefs as well.

According to Hindu belief, the actions of a person in this life affect his or her fate in the next. Good behavior is always rewarded. Bad behavior is always punished. Faithfull followers of Hinduism will be reborn into a higher position. Those whose acts have been bad may be born into a lower caste, or may even return as animals. *If a person leads a perfect life, he or she may be freed from this cycle of death and rebirth. As a result, the person’s soul becomes one with brahman.*

A Hindu’s Duties To become united with the one spirit and escape the cycle of death and rebirth, a person must obey his or her dharma. *Dharma* is the religious and moral duties of each person. These duties depend on such factors as a person’s class, age, and occupation. In Hinduism, it is a man’s duty to protect the women in his family, and it is a ruler’s duty to protect his subjects. Another important idea of Hinduism is *ahimsa*, or nonviolence. To Hindus, people and living things are part of brahman and therefore must be treated with respect. For that reason, many Hindus do not eat meat and try to avoid harming living things.

**The Practice of Hinduism**

As you have read, Hinduism teaches that there is more than one path to the truth. Because of this view, Hinduism allows its followers to worship in various ways.

**The Yogas:** Many non-Hindus know yoga as a physical activity, a system of special exercises and breathing. Hindus believe yoga exercises help free the soul from the cares of the world. In this way, the soul may unite with brahman. In fact, the word yoga means “union.” For Hindus, there are many yogas that may be used as paths to brahman. *Physical activity* is one yoga. Another is the yoga of *selfless deeds*, such as giving to the poor. By learning the sacred writings, a Hindu practices the *yoga of knowledge*. And by honoring a personal god, a Hindu follows the *yoga of devotion*.

Private Devotion: Hindus worship in public by praying and performing rituals in temples. They also show devotion privately at home. It is common for Hindus to choose a personal god, and to honor that god by offering food, gifts, and prayers at a home altar. A Hindu’s devotion to the god brings the soul closer to brahman.

1. What are the 3 main Hindu gods?
2. According to Hindu belief, what happens to a person’s soul after death?
3. How is yoga practiced by Hindus?